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PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH ASIA REGION

SUMMARY

The present document reports on and analyses major new trends and developments in UNICEF programme cooperation in the South Asia region during 1993.

The UNICEF regional office has responsibility for cooperation in the following countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Taken together, the over 420 million children of South Asia lag behind every other regional group in the basic support they receive in areas such as nutrition and education. At the same time, public policies and organized efforts ranging from community actions to inter-country cooperation are better geared today to meet children's needs than at any previous time. There is tangible progress towards specific, time-bound goals. Increasingly, intersectoral, community-based strategies are being developed to meet those goals, a trend that should be sustained and accelerated.

2. Experience suggests that child-centred development depends on the basic context of the community in which children live. Certain minimum political, economic and social conditions need to be assured to permit children to benefit from progress towards the mid-decade and decade goals.

3. It is accepted in policy and increasingly in action that, with government, professional and voluntary support, community self-management is the most viable approach to the goals for children. The sooner existing structures and processes adapt to this overall strategy, the faster and more sustainable progress towards the goals will be. The main thrust of the UNICEF effort in South Asia in the past year has been to put that principle into practice.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

4. The year 1993 was not a very peaceful one for parts of South Asia. Civil strife continued in the north of Sri Lanka. In Nepal, the problem of refugees from Bhutan has remained unsolved. The return of refugees from several countries has been delayed, with some 1.5 million Afghan refugees still in Pakistan.

5. Floods took an unusually heavy toll in lives and property in Nepal. Bangladesh coped better with the annual flooding than with a major outbreak of a cholera-like disease. In India, drought in Bihar and Orissa was followed later in the year by massive destruction in Maharashtra, caused by an earthquake. Excessive rains and floods affected farm output in Pakistan for the second successive year.

6. The political situation in Pakistan stabilized with the formation of a new Government in November 1993. A political assassination, with a consequent change of President, marred the Sri Lankan scene.

7. During the year, economic growth rates in the region have ranged from modest to moderate. There are parallel trends suggesting a general increase in poverty as a consequence of economic reforms. This concern was reflected both at the country level and in the recent South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit priority to curb poverty. The question of how to harmonize planning for the poor and a market-led growth policy is an old issue once again under review. The balance of wisdom seems to lie in a transparent use of the market, decisively complemented by priority for health, education and

employment plus social organization of the poor, especially women. This would be strongly supported by revitalized democratic local government systems.

8. Peace continues to elude Afghanistan. The collapsed basic services infrastructure has yet to be repaired, poverty is virtually universal and the situation of children and women is among the worst anywhere. Meanwhile, limited programme activities, more in the nature of relief and complementing United Nations humanitarian assistance, are coordinated mainly from outside the country on a year-to-year emergency perspective.

III. CHILD RIGHTS

9. All seven SAARC countries ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child between August 1990 and December 1992. The Convention is being used as a frame of reference by voluntary organizations and activist groups working for children, particularly on protection issues such as child labour and the exploitation of girls.

10. There has been a significant policy shift and follow-up in support of the progressive elimination of child labour, as affirmed by the 1992 Colombo Resolution of SAARC. Courts have begun to maintain that primary education is a fundamental right of every child; the challenge is to create the socio-political conditions for enjoying that right.

11. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has also spurred a revision or review of child-related legislation and corresponding structures in nearly all of the countries in the region. In addition, South Asian women's groups have called for the establishment of independent national commissions with statutory powers, reporting directly to parliaments, to oversee the rights of children and women. This signals a collective activist pressure that is likely to strengthen with time.

IV. DECADE GOALS AND STRATEGIES

12. The SAARC commitment to the mid-decade goals reaffirmed ongoing national efforts towards the global goals for the decade. Based on country reports, the regional prospect can be summarized as set forth below in paragraphs 13 through 20.

13. With sustained efforts, the expanded programme on information (EPI) coverage levels can be maintained at over 80 per cent by 1995, bringing closer the chances of achieving the goals of eliminating neonatal tetanus, eradicating polio and reducing measles. The distribution of vitamin A, linked to EPI and as part of a composite strategy that includes the promotion of natural dietary sources, is moving ahead. The universal iodization of edible salt within the next two years in all SAARC countries (except Maldives, which appears not to be in need) is within sight. Dracunculiasis (guinea worm disease), which used to affect persons in parts of India and Pakistan, is under control, with hardly any new cases.

14. Making the maternity facility in all hospitals "baby-friendly" by mid-decade should be possible in all countries, with more strategic advocacy and alliance. The universal use of home-based oral rehydration therapy (ORT) for childhood diarrhoea by 1996 may be difficult to achieve at the current pace, but not impossible given the level of knowledge and skills achieved over the past decade.

15. Family planning is an explicit SAARC concern, finding expression in the Colombo Resolution on Children, with the following specific goals for the decade: raising the minimum age of marriage for females to at least 18 years; and increasing contraceptive prevalence levels by 50 per cent over the current rate. These goals are possible to achieve, but a decisive departure from the disturbing fertility trends in most parts of South Asia depends on an interlinked approach to tackling the factors affecting the reproductive health of women and influencing women's status. Concerns related to both of those issues are being powerfully articulated by women's organizations across the region. A recent SAARC meeting on women and family health noted these considerations. Each of the member States may now be expected to affirm a set of specific goals, underpinned by strategies that blend the social and technological aspects of family health.

16. The gap in achieving the goal of universal access to safe drinking water is narrowing. Nevertheless, there are challenges to overcome, such as an unexpected lowering of the water table owing to a combination of the lack of rain and the extraction of water for irrigation. There is a need for the development and implementation of technological alternatives that are integrated with appropriate environmental planning.

17. The goals in the areas of nutrition, education and sanitation require sustained social processes and participatory mechanisms, along with a departure from centrally managed sectoral programmes. In turn, the political/administrative system should allow for progressive community management, including planning and monitoring. A "district approach" is being taken by all countries in the region. The goals for nutrition, primary education and sanitation will be achieved in some districts or sub-districts and subsequently accelerated to reach national coverage as experience is gained. Because of variations in local conditions, this district approach recommends itself equally well to the goals of child protection and safe motherhood.

18. If the same district happens to be the focus for the achievement of different goals, the positive impact on the children of that district would be greater. Yet the problem of coordination among different government ministries continues to hinder an integrated effort. The answer lies in disaggregating the process. The Colombo Resolution urges each country to form an annual action plan on major and supporting goals, divided into compact administrative units. Overall, the region is moving forward, with the formation of a strategic coalition of political, professional and popular forces at the community, country and international levels.

19. In relation to process indicators as well as impact indicators relevant to the goals for children, the monitoring function is now mainly a technocratic responsibility spread over government departments. Since social statistics are

still not central to national systems (in the way trade or money matters are), and since there is a familiar resistance to being monitored, considerable preparatory work remains to be done, involving common definitions, reliable baseline information or estimates for 1990, reporting systems and verifying mechanisms, wherever these do not exist. The South Asia Consultation on Social Statistics, in June 1992, provided an acceptable framework for action.

20. During 1993, a review of UNICEF programme monitoring facilities in each of the countries was completed by a task force and its report and recommendations have been shared for inter-country adaptation. A versatile district database system has been developed by one of the field offices in the region, drawing upon all available sources, including census sample surveys, routine administrative reports and special studies and supplemented by a district-level rapid assessment through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The foundations of this system could be reinforced by information generated by and for the community. The system is being adapted by the other field offices in the region and is expected to be helpful to the government systems for monitoring the goals for children. The SAARC process of annual reporting on children, which began after the Conference held at New Delhi in 1986, has been revamped with the approval of the SAARC Council of Ministers. A comprehensive common format and the creation of intersectoral committees at national and regional levels to ensure the quality of the reports are the new features.

V. COOPERATION WITH REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND NETWORKS

21. Building on productive collaboration with SAARC, highlighted by the two SAARC conferences on children (New Delhi in 1986 and Colombo in 1992), a formal framework agreement of cooperation has been finalized with the approval of the SAARC Council of Ministers and the UNICEF Executive Director. It provides for an agreed annual agenda of joint activities, starting in 1994, supported by regional resources and complementing UNICEF cooperation at the country level.

22. There have been potentially important developments in UNICEF cooperation with regional voluntary bodies. Following a decision taken at the South Asia Consultation on the Girl Child (Maldives, March 1992), the South Asian Association for Women's Studies (a federation of seven established national bodies) was launched to relate women's studies to social action through activities planned for 1994-1995. A regional group of economists contributed to the follow-up of the SAARC summit directives on poverty reduction at consultations held at Dhaka (in collaboration with the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) and in Washington, D.C. (arranged by the World Bank). Steps are being taken to assist the regional network of jurists to provide professional inputs to reduce child labour and to promote child rights. The South Asian Medical Association, which will meet shortly, is being encouraged to play a larger role in support of the goals for children. The scope for continuing the inter-religious and inter-parliamentary advocacy and action networks is being pursued.

23. During the year, in addition to regular consultations on common concerns, collaboration with other United Nations agencies at the regional level included three significant initiatives: a UNICEF/World Health Organization (WHO) staff

meeting on urban health, resulting in country-level follow-up actions; providing assistance to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) regional team in support of a SAARC conference on women and family health; and interaction on poverty issues with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) representatives at their regional meeting.

VI. SUPPORT TO COUNTRY PROGRAMMES

24. Support to country programmes is built into an annual work plan for the region prepared jointly with the field offices. The major responses to identified needs included guidelines for community-level strategies and district planning processes for achieving the mid-decade goals; support for costing and financing the goals; regional staff training workshops on child labour, budget planning and control, library software and gender-sensitive programming; and advice on country programming and review exercises. A regional meeting on sanitation was held, resulting in a substantive review report, in addition to the annual meetings of UNICEF professional staff in education, communication, urban services, management information systems and programme planning.

25. In the field of communication, a regional pilot training course in development reporting was held. A professional network of women journalists from South Asia and the Nordic countries was arranged. A workshop on community broadcasting was conducted and a survey on television usage is nearing completion.

VII. STUDIES AND PUBLICATIONS

26. Regional research included action studies in education (in progress), a comparative study of five tribal communities in five countries (nearing completion) and research on environmental concerns in water supply and sanitation (completed, under discussion).

27. The regional publications continued, namely, Future, a development quarterly from Kathmandu, and Links, a regional newsletter, in addition to articles from South Asia for the UNICEF headquarters publications. Work is in progress on the second issue of Perspectives, a regional statistical analysis, and on recommencing Search, a documentation journal.

VIII. LESSONS OF EVALUATIONS

28. A regional review of country-level evaluations suggests the need for evaluation by the project manager, preferably concurrent with implementation and based on monitoring of both cost and performance. The findings could then be validated by external evaluation and supplemented by evaluation by the community itself.

29. In relation to the multi-donor evaluation of UNICEF (E/ICEF/1993/CRP.7), experiences from the region point to the value of viewing support for service delivery, capacity-building and community empowerment as dimensions of the same

effort, calibrated to specific situations. This reasoning is all the more valid since UNICEF support is, or ought to be, integral to community-led, government-supported programming, the preferred social strategy, as outlined above, in order for South Asia to achieve and sustain the decade goals.

IX. USE OF REGIONAL AND GLOBAL FUNDS IN 1993

30. During 1993, the South Asia Regional Office utilized $856,400 from regional funds and an additional $173,800 from global funds for education, training in communications, water supply and sanitation and environment.

31. The pattern of programme expenditure conforms to the main thrust of the regional effort as outlined in the 1993 regional annual report, i.e., to promote sustainable processes towards the decade goals for children. This aim was pursued through an annual work plan, prepared jointly with the field offices in each country, in support of the strategy of decentralized, district approaches, community/Government partnerships, professional networking, research studies and publications.

32. Specifically, activities supported by regional and global funds included: continuation of support for professional group activities; a set of regional studies on the child and education (in progress, $37,000); a comparative study of the tribal child in five communities in five countries (nearing completion, $64,000); surveillance on children in especially difficult circumstances (in progress, $10,000); and facilitation of initiatives by the newly formed seven-country South Asian Association for Women's Studies. At the invitation of the United Nations Statistical Division, a professional contribution was arranged on behalf of the region at the October 1993 meeting at Beijing, on civil registration and vital statistics, with specific relevance to educational planning.

33. Financial participation in the rural cohort study on child survival (Maharashtra, India) continued during the year ($20,000), WHO having agreed to complete the study. Support for the acute respiratory illnesses (ARI) action-research (Jumla, Nepal) was concluded ($10,000).

34. Support was provided for a United Nations University project on South Asian perspectives ($25,000) to help maintain, through independent regional networking of scholars (including the former members of the South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation), the momentum of the follow-up of the SAARC summit directives on poverty reduction, linked to the summit commitment to the goals for children.

Publications

35. At a total cost of $16,500, the report of the September 1992 SAARC conference on children, a report on regional statistics, a booklet on urban services and the report of the first regional meeting on sanitation were produced.

Communication activities

36. Collaboration with the headquarters feature service involved $10,000 for articles. Preparation of advocacy materials for UNICEF in the region cost $11,000. Other initiatives in communications included networking of women journalists from South Asia and the Nordic countries ($23,000), a regional workshop on community radio ($10,000) and a survey on television usage ($5,000). The regional newsletter Links and the development quarterly Future, continued to be published.

Staffing and travel

37. The staff costs charged to regional funds totalled approximately $493,300 (international staff, $455,200, and national staff, $38,100). Within this amount, the posts of the health and economic advisers were filled only towards the end of the year, in October and November, respectively. Non-staff costs for official travel amounted to $42,700.

38. The Regional Office participated in the Asia strategy meeting (Bangkok, February 1993). The shared cost amounted to $11,000.

39. The year 1993 was the second full year of operation of the reconstituted Regional Office at its new location. The needs for computer equipment and furniture were met at a cost of $19,400. Approximately $28,000 was spent during the year on books and periodicals for the regional documentation centre.

Additional global funds

40. Global funds directly received by the Regional Office were utilized to support the preparation of a journalist training manual ($29,000), a consultancy to relate water supply and sanitation programming to environmental concerns (about $17,900) and the start-up of an environmental training for programme staff ($3,460). These funds were separate from the support received from the global education fund for the post of the education adviser and from the global training fund for regional training.

41. In summary, a total of $1,030,200 from different sources was used; of this amount, $856,400 was from the Regional Fund for Programme Preparation, Promotion and Evaluation. This represents an expenditure rate of 74 per cent overall and 80 per cent of the regional/global funds available to the region for programmes. Had the posts of health adviser and economic adviser been filled earlier as scheduled, and had the external relations and operations officers not transferred in mid-tenure, the utilization rate would have been higher.